



## ***Hymenolepis* Infection** (HIGH-meh-NAHL-eh-pis) **Dog and Cat Flea Tapeworm**

### **What is the most common kind of tapeworm infection?**

The dwarf tapeworm or *Hymenolepis nana* is the most common tapeworm infection diagnosed in the United States and throughout the world. Infection is diagnosed in children, in persons living in institutional settings, and in people who live in areas where sanitation and personal hygiene is inadequate.

### **How did I get infected?**

One can get infected by accidentally ingesting tapeworm eggs. This can happen by ingesting fecally contaminated foods and water, by touching your mouth with contaminated fingers, or by ingesting contaminated soil.

Adult tapeworms are very small in comparison with other tapeworms and may reach 15-40 mm (up to 2 inches) in length. The adult tapeworm is made up of many small segments, called proglottids (pro-GLOT-ids). As the tapeworm matures inside the intestines, these segments break off and pass into the stool. An adult tapeworm can live for 4-6 weeks. However, once you are infected, the dwarf tapeworm may cause auto infection (the tapeworm may reproduce inside the body) and continue the infection.

### **What are the symptoms of a tapeworm infection?**

Most people who are infected do not have any symptoms. Those who have symptoms may experience nausea, weakness, loss of appetite, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. Young children, especially those with a heavy infection, may develop a headache, itchy bottom, or have difficulty sleeping. Sometimes infection is misdiagnosed as a pinworm infection.

Contrary to popular belief, a tapeworm infection does not generally cause weight loss. You cannot feel the tapeworm inside your body.

### **How is tapeworm infection diagnosed?**

Diagnosis is made by identifying tapeworm eggs in stool. Your health care provider will ask you to submit stool specimens collected over several days to see if you are infected.

### **Is a tapeworm infection serious?**

No. Infection with the dwarf tapeworm is generally not serious. However, prolonged infection can lead to more severe symptoms; therefore, medical attention is needed to eliminate the tapeworm.

**How is a tapeworm infection treated?**

Treatment is available. A prescription drug called praziquantel is given. The medication causes the tapeworm to dissolve within the intestines. Praziquantel is generally well tolerated. Sometimes more than one treatment is necessary.

**Can infection be spread to other family members?**

Yes. Eggs are infectious (meaning they can re-infect you or infect others) immediately after being shed in feces.

**What should I do if I think I have a tapeworm infection?**

See your health care provider for diagnosis and treatment.

**How can dwarf tapeworm infection be prevented?**

- Wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet, and before handling food.
- If you work in a childcare center where you change diapers, be sure to wash your hands thoroughly with plenty of soap and warm water after every diaper change, even if you wear gloves.
- When traveling in countries where food is likely to be contaminated, wash, peel or cook all raw vegetables and fruits with safe water before eating.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have a parasitic infection, consult a health care provider.*

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